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SELF-CONTAINMENT

A Hindrance to Evangelism in the Church

The more obvious hindrances to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ are not necessarily the most deadly. Perils of geography, difficulties of communication, opposition of false religions, persecutions by unfriendly governments--all of these are powerfully obstructive, but the great enemy is within. Even in the heat of the battle of the Reformation, Luther had the honesty to recognize this. "I am more afraid of my own self," he said, "than of the Pope and all his cardinals. Because I have within me the great pope, Self."

It is easier, of course, and more self-satisfying to blame evangelistic set-backs on the enemies without. But the more searching question is to ask how much of the blame for failure we must share ourselves. What are the hindrances within the Church?

With some of these you are familiar - spiritual indifference, for example, a heresy.
~~Some of them have been discussed elsewhere in the Congress:~~
~~spiritual indifference, sacerdotalism, heresy.~~ But there is another which may be even more dangerous because it is so often unrecognized. This is the sin of self-containment. It may be defined as a lack of meaningful contact with the non-Christian world. It comes in many forms, but whether it is caused by wilful indifference, or fear of contamination, or ignorance, or a selfish pre-occupation with the Christianity community itself, the result is what contemporary theologians describe as "the Christian ghetto complex".

Of all the internal obstacles mentioned above this is most nearly fatal, for it so closely partakes of the very essence of sin--that is, a love of self that crowds out love of God and love of neighbor. Self-containment is sub-Christian, or perhaps more accurately, pre-Christian, for the Christian life begins with the new birth and the very imagery of the language suggests a breaking-out from a self-containing womb into a world of awareness and contact and need. The pattern of the new life is the self-emptying Christ (Phil. 2: 3-8), not the self-satisfied Pharisee (Lk. 18: 9-11). At no point is the Christian self-contained; he is Christ-sustained or dead. As for Christian mission and evangelism, self-containment and outreach are mutually exclusive. The church that is turned in upon itself has turned its back on the world to which it was sent by Jesus Christ.

There is no need to labor the point further. Self-containment is a basic denial of all that is Christian, and the disease is easily enough described and condemned. The problem is that few will admit to having it. It is always someone else's problem, some other church's crippling weakness.

There is, for instance, the classic example of a "Christian ghetto", the fate of Eastern Christianity under the Moslem conquerors. This is often compassionately described as the inevitable result of persecution, but that is not altogether true. It was, in the final analysis, the deliberate choice of the church. What finally produced the withered ghettos of the Nestorians and the Copts was not so much the sword of Islam as the law of Islam, which permitted conquered Christians to worship but forbade them to propagate the Christian faith. Faced with a choice between survival and witness, the church chose survival. It turned in upon itself. It ceased to evangelize. True, it survived, but what survived was no longer a whole church. It was a sick, ingrown community. [Dying. And Jesus says to him, "If the dead bury the dead. Break out. Break out, King of God"]

In Czarist Russia, ~~Christian withdrawal and self-containment~~ was even less of an imposition from without, than the experience of the Eastern churches. The Russian church made its own ghetto, but in the mind, not the body. Isolating themselves from the agony of the people, Orthodox priests argued about the color of their vestments and about how many fingers should be extended in the benediction, until the revolution broke in on them and brought them, too late, out of their never-never land of liturgy into the world as it really is.

It would be comforting to think that ~~now~~ the Church has ~~now~~ learned its lesson, and that such crippling self-containment is safely buried in the church's past. The saddening truth is that no church in the world is quite free from the taint of the same poison.

It appears in many forms. There is a self-containment of race, and a self-containment of caste. There is self-containment of language, and a self-containment of liturgy. Separatism is a form of self-containment. So also is its opposite, pre-occupation with church union. There is the self-containment of the great, state churches, too intent on national prestige and ceremonies and subsidies to notice that they no longer have worshipers. And there is the self-containment of the small, free churches, so busy protecting their freedom from the world that they have ceased to have any influence in the world. There is self-containment by creed, and self-containment by sacrament. There is the self-containment of old and tired churches who no longer want to send missionaries; and the self-containment of younger, nationalist churches who no longer want to receive them.

But no matter what form it may take--and there are as many forms as churches--, and no matter how plausibly some of its forms may be justified, self-containment is always and inevitably a [hindrance to evangelism.] *implying weakness from in the church*

Take, for example, racial self-containment. This is probably

*Ecumenical
Anti-ecumenical.*

the single most explosive issue in the world today. When racial discrimination³¹ penetrates the church it becomes more than a crime against humanity, it is an act of defiance against God himself (II Jn. 4:20). ~~Yet eleven o'clock Sunday morning has been called the most segregated hour in America. I do not believe that is true, and I am rather proud of Christian leadership in the civil rights movement, but that such a statement could be made at all is indictment enough.~~ The fact that there is any racial discrimination ~~at all~~ ^{at all} in the Christian church has already done irreparable damage to world evangelism. It is even possible, if present trends continue, that future historians may some day single this out as the decisive factor that drove a whole continent, Africa, away from Christ into the embrace of Islam.

omit

Another form of the same sin is self-containment by caste. Christians would like to pretend that this is limited to India and its Hinduism, but our own Western, Christian suburbs are riddled with it. It takes a more subtle form in the West. When the Church of England in the nineteenth century could be described as the Conservative Party gathered for prayer, and when a recent study of American church unions can point out that they never really cross class lines but usually remain a high-caste denominational phenomena (R. Lee, The Social Sources of Church Unity, 1960), it can hardly be claimed that Christians have bravely broken down the barriers of class. So self-contained has the church's social structure in fact become that some sociologists even assert that it purposefully excludes the lowest classes of American society from its evangelistic efforts. "Church programs are not designed to appeal to them and ministers never visit them.." say Vidich and Bensch in Small Town in Mass Society (quoted by P. Berger, in The Noise of Solemn Assemblies, 1961). "The ministers and laymen.. either do not see the unchurched or they have no desire to pollute the church membership with socially undesirable types."

Sometimes Christians shut themselves, all unwittingly, behind a language barrier. Evangelical jargon can be as unintelligible outside the inner circle as the language of the seminary is to the pew or military alphabetese outside the Pentagon. In a world where "redemption" means green stamps, and "sin" means sex, the very words with which we try to proclaim the gospel sometimes only serve to obscure it. ~~For the very reason~~ ^{therefore,} it can be dangerous to read nothing but evangelical literature. The man who lives in that one-vocabulary world too long loses the ability to talk meaningfully to anyone but his fellow-believers, and that is not evangelism.

Another kind of self-containment is separatism. It is as old as the Syrian desert, ~~and its anchorites chained to rocks or walls~~ ^{themselves} ~~walls~~ ^{themselves} up in caves. It is also, alas, as new as the latest church split in Korea. As a search for purity separatism may have a touch of justification, but its fatal flaw is self-containment.

Self-Containment - 4 4 4 4 4

It faces inward, not outward. It leads to negativism and withdrawal and self-righteousness. It talks evangelism but its Christian outreach has lost its winsome appeal and has built into it a self-defeating pattern of schism and isolation that aborts the evangelistic invitation by the grimly exclusive attitude with which it is extended. There is no such thing as evangelism by separation. Every Christian should belong actively to at least one non-Christian ~~organization or community~~ ^{that is,} or not specifically Christian organization in his community. Moreover he should join not just to evangelize it, but in order to understand it.

This last point is important. We defined the sin of self-containment as lack of meaningful contact with the non-Christian world. Perhaps this should be qualified. It is possible to have contacts that are meaningful, but only to one side. That kind of outreach only soothes the conscience or feeds the ego, it does not really break through the self-containment barrier. The Christian who is willing to meet the world only on his own terms, who feels no need to understand any position but his own, is still in his "Christian ghetto", and living to himself. His so-called contact with the world is counterfeit and artificial. His approach to others is gingerly self-protective, as carefully encapsulated from contamination as an astronaut in space, and just as awkward.

Its defensiveness precludes any real meeting of minds, ~~and alienates their intellectual~~. Its self-interestedness prevents the meeting of hearts and breaks down the one indispensable ~~medium of contact for Christians~~ ~~that is, the way of love~~ road of approach for any evangelism worthy of the name Christian, that is, the way of love.

There may be worse sins than self-containment, but few can more quickly blunt the growing edge of the church of Jesus Christ. The Bible counts it as the accursed sin. This is no light condemnation. Its sign is the barren fig tree (Mk. 11: 12-14), heavy with leaves for ~~itself~~ its own self-beautification, but sterile and ~~without~~ without fruit. ~~It was self-contained.~~ And when Jesus saw it, he cursed it.

And the sign is the man who was more out in being the fruit. (Mk. 11: 14) —

What did you — do you do more talking to each other —

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Self-containment (condensed) - 3 3 3 3 3

Finally, a word about the self-containment of separatism. As a search for purity, ^{isolation} separatism may have a touch of justification, but its fatal flaw is negative withdrawal. It may talk evangelism, but built into it is a self-defeating pattern of isolation that aborts the invitation by the grimly exclusive attitude with which it is extended. There is no such thing as evangelism by separation. Every Christian should belong to at least one non-Christian organization, and that not just to evangelize it, but to understand it.

This is important. We defined self-containment as lack of meaningful contact with the non-Christian world. It cannot be one-sided contact. The Christian who feels no need to understand any position but his own is still in his Christian ghetto. Even his evangelism is artificial, self-interested, self-protective--as carefully encapsulated from contamination as an astronaut in space, and just as awkward. It lacks the one indispensable ingredient, self-forgetting love.

There may be worse sins than self-containment, but few can more quickly dull the edge of evangelism. The Bible counts it as the accursed sin. Its sign is the barren fig tree (Mk. 11:12-14), heavy with leaves for itself, but sterile and without fruit. And when Jesus saw it, he cursed it. *Or the man who was more concerned about being fresh -*

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